Mr. Davidson Asks If South Intends To Do Nothing

THE ATTACK ON LEVIATHAN: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States, by Donald Davidson. Published by The University of North Carolina Press; [illegible] pages, $3.

Reviewed by William C. Frierson

Donald Davidson is well known in the South. He is perhaps the leading figure among the group of agrarians who wrote the textbook of newly reawakened Southern loyalties, "I'll Take My Stand," and through lectures and magazine articles he has emphasized the importance of the Southern view and the Southern way of thinking.

Mr. Davidson's progressive development has been toward sectionalism and the appreciation of the rich complexity of Southern traditions. He is a sectionalist because he has valued the North and found it wanting. He has valued the South and found in it substantial sources of strength and resolution and content. So he is the standard-bearer of a section. But he is more than this. To call him a social philosopher would be to undervalue his significance. He is rather a militarist who would, by whatever expedients he finds necessary, rouse the South to a totalitarian effort for economic and spiritual self-sufficiency—in a word, redemption.

Mr. Davidson has approached his problem through indirection. Before concentrating his attention on the South he has shown the material, political, and emotional forces that have gone into the making of the varied national regions and sections. He is not convinced that in union there is strength. Rather he feels that, socially and culturally, the strength of the nation lies in the strength of its sections. He speaks with conviction, but he is really bidding for an alliance. The sections must each win their place in the sun. But the South might well enter into partnership with the West in opposing the Leviathan of Northeastern capitalism.

Mr. Davidson holds that the colonial dependency of the South, its unfavorable trade balance, is the result of no chance or accidental circumstances. It is directly the result of exploitation. Misguided Southern liberals of the years following 1900 have abetted this exploitation through the endeavor to bring Northern capital South. So the South has depleted its resources in paying tribute to Leviathan, and the net result is that to the miseries of Civil War origin there is now added the shabbiness of the low-wage group and the dislocations incident to an industrial collapse. What gives the Southerner due cause for indignation is that critics "damn the South for not repairing its deficiencies, and by way of tonic they offer another swig of the patent medicine that has been costly without being curative."

But the author of "Attack on Leviathan" has more to offer than invective. He records with affection the shades of regional variation, the Southern heritage, and he praises the Southerner for clinging to ways of life that he knows to be good. Man's heart rests in a region and finds content in a region's ways. The native loves the land, the soil; and the Southern intellectual properly allies himself with the section of his origin.

It endows him "with character and purpose. He is born of a region. He will deny its parenthood to his own hurt. Without its background he is a homeless exile in the wilderness of modern life. The self which he is, if not ignobly impugned, will readily be a modern self, and what he creates, if he can resist the perversions of our time, will be both the expression of the region and of himself, no matter what the subject and what the style. It is the office of the nation to conserve and cherish this free effort, and surely never by precept or example to delude us into thinking that a novel about a plowboy is only a regional curiosity, but a novel about a bellboy, a national masterpiece."

The sections of the book which I have discussed introduce the militant and realistic approach to the Southern dilemma. There follows a bitter account of the Southern situation: "Of the nation's total of 150,000,000 eroded acres 97,000,000 are in the South . . The Southeast buys 59.5 of all the fertilizer bought by the nation. The Northeast buys 12.8 per cent; the Middle States 19.5 per cent . . . The agricultural expenses of the Southeast are distributed in about the following proportion: for fertilizer, 41 per cent; for feed, 27 per cent; for labor, 32 per cent. In the rest of the United States the distribution is: for fertilizer, 6.3 per cent; for feed, 46.4 per cent; for labor, 47.3 per cent . . . The South has the largest proportion of children of school age to the total population alongside the smallest income and wealth with which to educate them . . . In interstate migration since 1930 the heaviest net loss was in the South: 3,400,000 . . ."

Clearly something must be done. But what?

Two procedures, plainly, are necessary: (1) the South must be aroused to united action, and (2) the nation must be aroused to awareness of the Southern dilemma.

Mr. Davidson realistically ponders the situation. It is difficult to stir the lusty forces of strong sectional feeling without unleashing sectional antagonisms. But it is also difficult to arouse the Southerner, for "after long years he has learned to take social programs as he takes the weather. They generally come from far away, he is not responsible for them, he will do nothing about them until it becomes necessary to vote down a child labor amendment or check a racial equality movement."

But suppose that the Southerner can be aroused, what then will be the object of his effort? As Mr. Davidson sees the matter, the direction is clear. "The South must play sectional politics, or it must still be a dependent, hoping to receive a bounty or terms that will not be too disagreeable or humiliating." In plain English, the South must get solidly behind a program for a stream of federal monies, to reverse the current flow of Southern money to the Northeast, and it must conclude a hard-boiled alliance with the Western regions.

Having said this much, Mr. Davidson has said a great deal. And he has said it well. "Attack on Leviathan" is the work of a very considerable poet turned sectional patriot.

(Mr. Frierson is a professor at the University of Alabama. At one time he was a member of the Agrarian Group in Nashville and was closely associated with Mr. Davidson.)

* * *

MOULDERS OF DESTINY: Renaissance Lives and Times, by Lloyd W. Eshleman. Published by Covici-Friede; 328 pages, $3.

We of the present should be particularly interested in the Renaissance, because it, too, was a time of breaking with the past, a time in which men advocated all manner of new art, politics, government, living; we of today have much in common with the Renaissance of the fifteenth through the sixteenth century.

Mr. Eshleman, a fine scholar and excellent writer, has chosen to portray the Renaissance through 10 of its spokesmen, 10 men who spoke through art, science, chivalry, war—rather nine men and one woman, and curiously enough it is Joan of Arc who speaks more eloquently through war than any of the men are able to do.

"This book," Mr. Eshleman says, "is not a scholarly treatise nor yet a superficial collection of dramatic highlights from history and biography. It is rather a book that sets forth in plain and simple language a brief outline of some of the more important lives and events in the makings of modern history.

"The lives and events included in this book have been selected by the author for three reasons: First, because they illustrate the important tendencies not only of the Renaissance, but also of modern life; second, because most of them have been neglected by historians and biographers; or else their histories have been somewhat perverted in the telling; third, because they represent lives and events an understanding of which is essential to a satisfactory comprehension of what has happened in the making of modern history.

"The story begins with the intellectual dawn of modern times, when Lorenzo Valla revolutionized the thinking of his medieval contemporaries, before the art of printing was developed. It ends with the rising tide of capitalistic enterprise, nationalism and imperialism early in the seventeenth century."

The 10 "moulders of destiny" chosen by Mr. Eshleman are: Lorenzo Valla, "the greatest humanist of all times;" Joan of Arc; Henry VII, who founded the modern Brit-